Learning to Dance
An exegesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research Overview

This research will examine the various techniques of writing stage directions for choreography or dance action within a feature film script. I will discuss and analyse two methodologies for annotating choreography, both developed by experts in dance notation. I will also examine and interpret the observations made by film director, dancer and choreographer Bob Fosse about the purpose and objectives of dance action in feature film scripts.

I will examine two case studies of contemporary feature film scripts that contain dance action. The selected scripts are Strictly Ballroom (Australia, 1992) and Flashdance (USA, 1983). These scripts do not use a published system of dance notation to write dance action. I will analyse and investigate the stage directions for choreography and dance action used within both scripts.

The exploration of these various approaches to film choreography may form the basis for writing stage directions for choreography or dance action in my own feature length screenplay titled Learning to Dance.

In addition to the study of choreographic notation I will explore the observations made by film theorists such as Adrian Martin, Jerome Delamater, Rick Altman, J.P Telotte and Steve Neal about genres that contain dance action as a defining characteristic. It is my intention to write a screenplay that in part, borrows from the customs and codes of an established genre or subgenre. Therefore my objective is to understand, appreciate and reflect upon the genre the best fits my vision of Learning to Dance.

The key research questions for this project are:

1.) What methodologies or frameworks may be used for writing stage directions for choreography or dance action?
2.) What are the observations made by film theorists about genres that contain dance action as a defining characteristic?
3.) How might the conventions, methodologies, observations and case studies discussed in this research be useful to my screenplay project?
1.2 Research Structure

This exegesis is organised into the following three chapters.

1. Introduction (current chapter)
2. Writing Dance Action
3. Genre and Learning to Dance

The chapter titled Writing Dance Action will address the question ‘What methodologies or frameworks may be used for writing stage directions for choreography or dance action?’ This chapter will examine the various techniques for writing stage directions for choreography or dance action within a feature film script. In this chapter I will discuss and analyse two methodologies for annotating choreography, both developed by experts in dance notation. My research will explore the Benesh and Laban techniques for writing dance action into feature film script writing. I will also explore and demonstrate how Fosse’s observations about dance action may form a useful and practical guide for writing dance action in feature film scripts.

The following chapter titled Genre and Learning to Dance will explore the question ‘What are the observations made by film theorists about genres that contain dance action as a defining characteristic?’ In this chapter I will investigate two genres, specifically the musical and a genre Adrian Martin refers to as the dance movie. The primary purpose of this chapter is to establish a frame of reference that when applied to writing Learning to Dance, may be styled and customised to help achieve my desired creative outcome.

1.3 Research Rationale

Dance academics, historians and experts tend to agree, there is relatively scant theoretical literature on the subject of dance. Cultural studies theorist, Jane C. Desmond asserts, ‘Dance remains a greatly undervalued and under theorised arena of bodily discourse.’ (Desmond 1997, p. 29) Film scholar, Sherril Dodds (2001, p .xi) in her book Dance on Screen also observes ‘…there is a dearth of reference texts that deal with the area of
My research supports the findings of Desmond and Dodd. There appears to be a lack of literature relating to dance in film particularly in the areas of scriptwriting and stage directions for choreography. Thus an important objective of my exegesis is to contribute new research to illuminate what Dodd’s has identified as a ‘rapidly evolving’ (Dodds 2001, p. xxi) field of study – dance on screen. To achieve this I will pay exclusive attention to scriptwriting narrative screenplays that contain dance action.

In my screenplay one of the key support roles is a Muslim girl who is a belly dancer. The protagonist in the story is Anglo-Saxon with talent in classical and modern dance. In writing Learning to Dance I need to provide stage directions that combine these two diverse dance forms to create a new, eclectic style of dance. Part of the challenge is to develop a written language that allows me to reflect the visual aspects of this unique hybrid style.

As a screenwriter with particular interest in dance I intend to employ dance sequences at different stages throughout my script as a story telling mechanism. It is important to me to be able to clearly communicate and translate choreographic direction into my script in a manner that ensures its eventual interpretation fulfils its original purpose in the story. Therefore I am seeking a methodology for translating and expressing dance sequences in an accurate and concise written form. One key outcome of my research may be the development of a structural and technical framework for providing choreographic direction appropriate to the conventions of screenplay writing.

I therefore intend to contribute to the screenwriting field by attempting to develop a framework for providing stage directions for choreography within a film script and then applying this framework within my own screenplay, Learning to Dance.
1.4 Case Studies - synopsis

Three case studies will be referenced within this research to situate the frameworks, theories and methodologies to be discussed, analysed and evaluated. These case studies are:

- **Learning to Dance**, (Australia, 2007) written by Suzie Howard
- **Strictly Ballroom**, (Australia, 1992) written by Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce
- **Flashdance**, (USA, 1983) written by Thomas Hedley

A brief synopsis of each screenplay is provided below.

1.4.1 Synopsis of Learning to Dance

**Protagonist:** Giselle Williams

*Learning to Dance* is the story of Giselle Williams (18) who aspires to be a professional dancer. When Giselle’s father is arrested for fraud Giselle is forced to abandon her wealthy surrounds to live and work in one of Melbourne’s tough, inner city, high-rise public housing estates. Here Giselle meets her key support roles, Muslim siblings Yasmina (21) a talented belly dancer and her handsome brother and Giselle’s future love interest Ali (20) who welcome Giselle into their humble, tight knit and family oriented community.

When Giselle’s dance career begins to stall Ali encourages Yasmina and Giselle to enter a dance competition – The Melbourne International Arts Festival Dance Gala. Giselle and Yasmina combine their talents to create a new eclectic dance style – a blend of their diverse talents - belly dancing and modern dance and enter the competition.

The road to Giselle achieving her dancing aspirations is paved with an abundance of complications. These include:

- Yasmina’s growing jealousy over the attention Giselle receives from Ali and the public housing estate community;
- A sudden end to Giselle’s and Ali’s romance when Yasmina spitefully reveals that Ali has a fiancé in Turkey;
• Giselle’s increasingly distant and dysfunctional relationship with her father who refuses to have physical contact with her; and;
• Giselle’s public eviction from the housing estate after a journalist discovers Giselle’s father has illegally orchestrated Giselle’s public housing – resulting in Giselle withdrawing from the dance competition.

Learning to Dance concludes with Giselle and Yasmina competing at the dance festival and winning $50,000 in prize money. Giselle and Yasmina decide to open a dance company with their winnings. Giselle and Ali resume their romantic relationship after Ali extradites himself from his engagement and Giselle’s father apologises to Giselle for his behaviour.

1.4.2 Synopsis of Flashdance

Protagonist – Alex Owens

Flashdance is the story of Alex (18) a talented yet untrained dancer who wishes to join a professional dance company – the prestigious Pittsburgh Conservatory of Dance.

Alex has been working two jobs to save the funds required to attend the Conservatory and is a welder by day and an exotic dancer by night. Alex is deterred from applying to the Conservatory due to her lack of formal training and lack of confidence. This is the central problem that the protagonist must overcome if she is to achieve her goal.

Alex’s mentor is an elderly woman and former dancer Hanna Long who continually encourages Giselle to audition for the Conservatory.

Alex’s love interest is Nick Hurley who is also the owner of the building site where Alex works. Nick uses his network of connections within the Conservatory and organises an invitation for Alex to audition. When Alex discovers she has not been invited to audition based on her own merits she argues with Nick and refuses to try out for the conservatory.
Following the sudden death of Alex’s mentor Hanna, Alex reconsiders and decides to audition. The screenplay concludes with Alex being accepted into the Conservatory and Alex and love interest Nick re-kindling their relationship.

1.4.3 Synopsis of Strictly Ballroom

Protagonist – Scott Hastings

Strictly Ballroom is the story of ballroom dancer Scott Hastings (21). Scott aspires to win a ballroom dance competition - the Pan Pacific Championships, by dancing his own choreography and dance steps. However within the insular, tyrannical and seemingly obsessive world of ballroom dancing, new steps are strictly forbidden.

When Scott choses to dance his own steps he is met with harsh disapproval and criticism by his antagonist - the head of the Ballroom Dancing Federation Barry Fife, his mother and his coach. If the protagonist Scott is to achieve his goal he must find the courage to dance his own steps in the face of disapproval from his peers and teachers. This is the central problem that drives the narrative of the screenplay.

When Scott’s dance partner loses patience with the controversy that follows his penchant for dancing illegal ballroom steps she resigns the partnership. Scott decides to partner novice dancer and future love interest Fran. Fran is supportive of Scott’s radical dance style and is eager to learn. Fran and Scott agree to enter the Pan Pacific competition together.

Midway through the screenplay Scott faces his greatest challenge to achieving his goal – in the form of a potential new partnership with the glamorous, available and ballroom award winning Tina Sparkle. Scott momentarily loses sight of his goal as he is blinded by the chance of stardom with Tina. It is Fran, who in a moment of despair unintentionally reminds Scott of his goal.

**FRAN**

I’m sure you will win.
SCOTT follows FRAN’S gaze. He can see the vision of NATHAN and TINA. Like a child seeing the emperor’s new clothes he realises there is nothing there.

SCOTT

I could never do that.

(Luhrmann & Pearce 1992, p. 41)

Scott and Fran continue to rehearse for the Pan Pacific’s in secret. Scott’s antagonist, Barry Fife lies to Scott and tells him his father attempted to dance his own steps at the same competition many decades ago and was humiliated. He advises Scott:

BARRY

When you were born Doug found a reason to live. He vowed one day you would win the trophy that he could never win...For Doug to see you so close and go the same way he went, it would be too much for him to bear. I think it would kill him...

(Luhrmann & Pearce 1992, p. 63)

As a result of this conversation with Barry Fife Scott decides to appease his father and dance officially approved steps at the Pan Pacific championships. Scott also resigns his dance partnership with love interest Fran in favour of a trained ballroom dancer.
The screenplay concludes with Scott’s father revealing that Barry Fifes’s claims (above) are a lie and that he would very much like Scott to dance his own steps. Scott and Fran resume their partnership and go on to achieve victory at the competition.
2 Writing Dance Action and Learning to Dance

2.1 Writing Dance Action
In this chapter I will examine the methodologies and/or frameworks that may be referenced and applied to writing stage directions for choreography or dance action within a screenplay. Specifically I will discuss dance notation and Bob Fosse’s framework for dance action.

2.2 Writing Dance Action and the Role of the Screenwriter
To set the context of this discussion it is important to:
1.) Define the function of the screenplay;
2.) Define the role of the screenwriter; and;
3.) Explain the relationship between a screenplay containing dance action and the role of choreographer.

2.2.1 Screenplay Function
The *Macquarie Dictionary* (1997) defines a screenplay as ‘noun, the script of a film including details of camera positions and movement, action, dialogue, lighting etc.’

Dr Lisa Dethridge (2003) in her definitive text *Writing Your Screenplay* suggests the screenplay is a blue print or set of coded instructions that provide guidance to a team of craftspeople to help create a film. The team of craftspeople represent the target audience of the screenplay document and may include a combination of director, actor, choreographer and set designer.

The screenplay is therefore the means by which the screenwriter can channel and communicate their vision of the end product – the film, to a team of creative professionals.
2.2.2 Role of the Screenwriter

Dethridge (2003, p. 16) suggests a possible job description of a screenwriter ‘a highly skilled literary technician who manipulates literary structures.’ It may seem obvious that it is the role of the screenwriter to write the screenplay. However a screenwriter’s approach to this task may be influenced by many factors such as screenwriting conventions relating to story structure, form and genre. One of the challenges a screenwriter may face is determining how much to communicate. Many screenwriting scholars and theorists suggest screenwriters should avoid the tendency to micro manage the audience of their screenplay by writing overly detailed, redundant or superfluous stage directions. For example, screenwriting theorist and scholar Robert McKee (1997, p. 383) in his text Story advises his readers to ‘leave room for the actor’ and not to ‘pepper the page with constant description of behaviours, nuances of gesture, tones of voice…’

Therefore it is important to me to clearly articulate how I envision my role as a screenwriter in relation to a potential key audience member of Learning to Dance – the choreographer.

2.2.3 Relationship between the Screenwriter and the Choreographer

Rib Davies (2003, p. 167) scriptwriter and author of Writing Dialogue for Scripts informs his readers, ‘the writer must not try to do everything.’ Here Davies is referring to the relationship of the screenwriter to some of the other key roles within the overall process of creating a narrative film.

For example, Davies (2003, p. 167) in his discussion of stage directions warns, ‘The writer writes the lines, but it is the actor’s job to deliver them, and it is in part the director’s job to advise on that delivery. The writer makes a serious mistake if he or she tries to take over these roles.’ Davies explains that in addition to denying a film production a layer of creativity, it may be insulting to the specialist craftsperson to have their role hijacked by the screenwriter.
The same may be said of writing stage directions for dance action and the role of the choreographer. It is not my intention to replace or fulfil the role of a choreographer or director in a future *Learning to Dance* film crew. I do not propose to translate each step of choreographed movement onto the page. It is my intention to write stage directions for choreography that provide concise instructions that may be followed or interpreted by a choreographer. My objective is to complement and inspire the role of choreographer by expressing dance action in a form that provides clear direction. Throughout my research, and analysis of various techniques for writing stage directions for dance action I have been highly cognisant of this objective.

### 2.3 Introduction to Dance Notation

In her authoritative text *Dance Notation*, Ann Hutchinson Guest compares and contrasts various forms of dance notation that have arisen in Europe, the United States and the Middle East since the 15th century. Guest (1984) observes dance notation provides a structured and detailed framework for translating and communicating dance action into written words, figures and symbols. Dance notation has traditionally been utilised for the written communication of live dance action for example, theatre performances of ballet. However, dance action also features in non-live media such as film scripts. I will now explore the application of dance notation to writing stage directions for dance action within a feature film script.

### 2.4 What is Dance Notation?

Guest (1984, p. xiv) defines dance notation as ‘the translation of four dimensional movements (time being the fourth dimension) into signs written on two dimensional paper.’ Examples of written signs include, dots, dashes, stick figures, numbers, alphabetic characters and whole words.

Dance notation has also been applied to fields outside of dance. For example, a medical research project conducted by the Centro di Educazione Motoria, Florence between 1964
and 1966 used Benesh Movement Notation to record and analyse the movement of cerebral palsy patients. Reverend Remy Zadra initially invented and published his Zadra Notation System for educational purposes to record and teach physical exercise such as gymnastics (Guest 1984). The Laban system aims to cover all areas of human movement and has been applied to industry, education and recreation (Brown & Parker 1984).

These examples demonstrate that dance notation has the scope to be applied to multiple fields of study and movement types. This is one of the reasons I was initially attracted to review dance notation. In Learning to Dance I intend to employ a variety of forms of movement such as gesture, belly dance, classical ballet and free style dance throughout the script. Therefore I am seeking a methodology for describing dance action that encompasses a wide variety of movement forms.

For the purpose of this research two dance notation systems have been reviewed and investigated as to their suitability for writing stage directions for dance action. These notation systems are Benesh Movement Notation and Labanotation.

2.5 Benesh Movement Notation – Basic Overview

2.5.1 Introduction

The first notation system to be discussed is that of Joan and Rudolf Benesh. First released in England in 1955, Benesh Movement Notation is written from left to right on a five-line horizontal stave (similar to music notation.) The Beneshs main focus has been on notating classical ballet and the authors (Benesh & Benesh 1977) insist, ‘The five lines form a perfect base or matrix for the human figure.’

2.5.2 How It Works

Benesh Movement Notation works by plotting details about movement of the body along a five-line stave. Information about movement is represented visually within, above and below the stave using symbols such as dots, dashes, curved lines, words and stick figures. Movement is described from the point of view of the performer for example, as if the writer is standing behind the dancer.
Benesh Movement Notation caters for individual (i.e. solo performer) and group (i.e. pas de deux) movement. For group work, a unique symbol may be assigned to each individual. For example, ♀ or ↑ or ⃣ may denote different dancers.

Benesh Movement Notation meticulously describes specific details about movement. The type of detail recorded may include:

**Above stave information:**
- Rhythm
- Beat
- Tempo
- Phrasing (i.e. 4 beats 1,2,3,4,1,2,3,4, 1,2,3,4)

**Below stave information:**
- Direction
- Location
- Travel

**In stave information:**
- Position of the body (shoulders, hip, legs, arms, stretched, bent)
- Head and body movement
- Weight changes

### 2.5.3 The five line stave

As can be seen in figure 1, each line of the stave represents a location on an upright body. From top down, line one represents the head, two the shoulders, three the waist, four the knees and five the feet. According to the Beneshes’ (1977, p. 20) ‘to record a position or a pose taken up by a person it is only necessary to note the exact spots occupied by the four extremities, the hands and the feet. In addition, the position of a bend, such as a knee or elbow, is also required.’
Figure 1 and figure 2 provide a visual example of how an individual standing upright with arms fully stretched may be plotted on the stave. Figure 3 shows a classical ballet step recorded using Benesh Movement Notation.

**Figure 1. The Five Line Stave** (Benesh Institute web site, How it works section.)

Movements are described by plotting the body’s changing positions along a five-lined stave in a consecutive series of notated ‘frames’. The stave lines coincide naturally with visually distinctive features of the human body.

- height of the top of the head
- height of the shoulders
- height of the waist
- height of the knees
- floor

The notated position, locating the hands and feet in a plane that is ‘level’ with the body. No other information is necessary to give a clear ‘picture’.

**Figure 2. Level – the basic signs of Benesh Notation**

- Level
- Behind
- In front

**Figure 3. Sample Benesh Notation** (Benesh Institute web site, How it works section.)

The figure shows the raised limbs extended in front and behind the body. The sign below the stave indicates the direction the dancer is facing.

The movement lines added to the second recording show that the dancer stepped forward to achieve the position while moving her left arm in a wide arc from overhead and raising her right arm from the side.

The addition of ‘movement lines’, which trace the paths made by the extremities, turns the static figure into a moving image.
2.5.4 Who uses Benesh Movement Notation?
Dance companies around the world have adopted Benesh Movement Notation. For example, both the Royal Ballet Covent Garden and the Australian Ballet employ full-time Benesh notators. The ballet syllabus for The Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) and the major examination syllabus for the Cecchetti ballet technique are recorded in Benesh Movement Notation.

In the next section a brief overview of the second dance notation system will be provided.

2.6 Labanotation – Basic Overview
2.6.1 Introduction
The second annotation method to be discussed is that of Rudolf von Laban and is called Labanotation. Laban’s annotation technique first published in his book Dance Script in 1928 was developed without bias to any particular form of dance.

2.6.2 The Vertical Stave
In contrast to the Benesh technique the Laban method of notation is based on a vertical stave with a centre line dividing the right and left sides of the body. The vertical stave (see figure 4 below) is read from bottom up and according to Guest (1984) allows for greater indication of continuous movement.

Figure 4. The Vertical Staff (Griesbeck 1996, Structure the Staff section)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A = Line at the start of the staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.6.3 How It Works

Like Benesh Movement Notation, Labanotation allows for detailed translation of movement onto the page. As demonstrated in figure 5 columns within the staff represent the main parts of the body. Specific body parts such as, limbs and joints are shown by families of symbols. Numbers are reserved for music measures, counts and number of people and as shown in figure 6 block arrows indicate direction. (Guest 1984). Signs are lengthened to indicate the length of movement thus a longer sign indicates a longer the movement. Unlike Benesh Movement Notation timing is built into each movement symbol. According to Guest (1984, p. 84) this allows Labanotation to be ‘self sufficient and not dependent on notated sequences being placed next to a music staff.’
Figure 5 – Parts of the Body

A = Left arm  
B = Left side of the body  
C = Left leg gestures  
D = Left supports  
E = Right supports  
F = Right leg gestures  
G = Right side of the body  
H = Right arm  
I = Head

Figure 6. Block Arrows  (Dance Notation Bureau web site, Notation Basics section)

- = Place
= High
= Middle
= Low
2.6.4 Who uses Labanotation?
Labanotation is used to record different styles of dance such as ballroom dancing, folk and classical ballet. Labanotation scores include works by ‘artists such as George Balanchine, Paul Taylor, Antony Tudor, Bill T. Jones, Doris Humphrey, William Forsythe, José Limón, Laura Dean, and about 155 others.’ (The Dance Notation Bureau web site, About DNB section)

2.7 Comparison of Labanotation and Benesh Movement Notation
In the previous sections a brief overview of two dance notation systems was provided. These systems are Benesh Movement Notation and Labanotation. Let’s take a look at how the systems compare to each other.

- Both systems have professional industry credibility as evidenced by the professional industry bodies and dance professionals who have adopted the systems.
- Both systems can record very detailed aspects about movement including a variety of movement forms such as classical ballet, ballroom dancing and folk dancing. Therefore both systems could be used to communicate stage directions for dance action within a screenplay.
- Study and/or experience is required by the notator to gain fluency in both notation systems.

A three year research project by William C. Reynolds about dance notation, called the Anstey Project compared and contrasted three different notation systems, Laban, Benesh and a third system called Eshkol-Wachmann. Some of the key findings included (Guest 1984):
- The Laban and Benesh notation systems are highly accurate and produce limited errors, although Laban is slightly more accurate. Errors made by notators were more common than errors with the notation system itself.
- Both notation systems take a similar amount of time to record.
• Notation speed is influenced by the notator’s familiarity with the dance style and the degree of organisation within the dance style. The Benesh system has predominately been used in ballet and Reynold’s findings attribute its professional success in this field in part to the structured nature of ballet.

In summary, Labanotation and Benesh Movement Notation are similar in their approach and outcome. Whilst both forms of dance notation could be used to record stage directions for dance action, as we shall discuss in the next section, it is a question of practical suitability to the conventions of screenplay writing.

2.8 Application of Dance Notation to Learning to Dance

The purpose of this chapter is to determine if the frameworks and methodologies that have been researched and analysed can be applied to writing stage directions for dance action within a screenplay.

Benesh Movement Notation and Labanotation offer the ability to accurately and precisely record detailed choreographed movement. A notated dance score, when interpreted by an experienced notator has the potential to be an exact replica of the mind’s eye. This is certainly the greatest attraction of dance notation for me and for this reason I suggest dance notation may appeal to other screenwriters with a dance background.

For example, the protagonist in Learning to Dance will perform an exercise from the ‘port des bras’ section of the Cecchetti ballet syllabus during a ballet class in act two. In this example dance notation would be a perfect fit for writing stage directions for dance action as I could precisely replicate the exercise.

However the adoption of dance notation by screenwriters is compromised by practical considerations. The provision of a dance score within a film script would seriously infringe upon or possibly eliminate the role of choreographer. In addition to this the scriptwriter would need to be fluent in reading and writing the selected notation system in
order to communicate within it. This could take several years of study and practical experience. For example, by completing a dance notation course at the Benesh Institute (Benesh Institute website, How it works section). A third party, experienced in dance notation, could also be engaged to assist. For both of these reasons dance notation would only be a suitable system for specialist screenwriters with a background in dance and or dance notation.

Perhaps the best application of dance notation for the purpose of writing stage directions for dance action is to use a method similar to documenting an original music score for a screenplay – as a separate, yet related entity. Using this approach a screenwriter with a background in dance and dance notation could also write the dance score for the screenplay in a separate but related document. In this case the writer would not infringe upon the conventions of screenplay writing, such as those discussed in previous sections regarding brevity and stage directions.

In the next section we will explore Bob Fosse’s framework for writing dance action. In comparison to dance notion this framework does not require a specific background in dance or a dance notation communication system (such as Labanotation).

### 2.9 Bob Fosse’s Framework for Dance Action

‘First, I watch to see if they have stolen anything from me. If they haven’t, then I try to see what I can steal from them.’

Bob Fosse (Kobal 1983, p. 281) on what he looks for when viewing the work of a choreographer.

#### 2.9.1 Introduction

Bob Fosse (Kobal 1983, p. 286) the critically acclaimed film director and choreographer of film musicals including *All That Jazz*, *Cabaret* and *Sweet Charity*, proposes four criteria that may be achieved by dance action in film musicals. The criteria are as follows:
1. Set the environment or atmosphere or character behaviour
2. Further the action
3. Express emotion
4. Entertainment value

According to Fosse the above criteria should ‘be accomplished with some beauty. They should be handsome to look at. And, somehow, emotionally affect the audience.’ (Kobal 1983, p. 286)

Likewise Fosse’s peer, dancer, actor, director and choreographer Gene Kelly suggests that dance action functions most effectively when it arises from one of three filmic sources; plot situations; character development; or incidents that enhance one of these two (Telotte 2002).

Whilst they may not have intended to both Fosse and Kelly have outlined a framework or set of criteria that may be applied to writing stage directions for dance action in film scripts.

2.9.2 Understanding Fosse’s framework
Both the Fosse and Kelly observations focus on the screenwriter’s purpose or motivation for including dance action in a screenplay, for example for entertainment purposes or to further the action or perhaps both. As the person responsible for creating a screenplay, the screenwriter is most likely to have a reason or purpose for wanting to write dance action into their story. Dethridge (2003, p. 17) suggests screenwriters ‘…learn to present your ideas in such a way that they will be received and understood rather than rejected.’

If stage directions for dance action are to achieve the purpose for which they were written they must be able to be received and understood by their audience who may include directors, actors and choreographers. Therefore the information contained within stage directions should be clear otherwise there is a danger the screenwriter’s original intent, function and purpose may be lost in translation. To achieve this Fosse’s criteria may be
used as a guide for determining the purpose of incorporating stage directions for dance action into a screenplay.

I will now examine each criterion within Fosse’s framework using examples from selected case studies. I will also provide examples of how Fosse’s framework will be applied to Learning to Dance to write stage directions for dance action.

2.9.3 Set the environment or atmosphere or character behaviour

Here Fosse has suggested two functions of dance action within a screenplay.

1. To create the location or setting of a particular scene
2. To contribute to character development

Screenwriting theorist and scholar Syd Field (1984, p. 31) states that a screenplay is a story told visually, with pictures. Similarly McKee (1997, p. 370) in his text Story says, ‘Great story tellers have always known that show, don’t tell is the ultimate creative task: to write in a purely dramatic and visual way, to show a natural world of human being behaviour, to express the complexity of life without telling.’ Likewise film theorist Viki King (1988, p. 23) specifically emphasizes to her readers that ‘Character is revealed through action.’

Field (1984), King (1988) and McKee (1997) encourage screenwriters to maximise the visual capacity and capability of their screenwriting. For example, rather than write dialogue where the protagonist says he or she likes dancing, write stage directions that show the protagonist dancing.

Dance action is compatible with McKee’s ‘show don’t tell’ philosophy as dance action is interpreted visually. Therefore dance action may be employed to show elements of a screenplay such as character development and creating the visual components of a location or scene.

Application to case study - Flashdance
An example of dance action being used to set the environment or atmosphere or character behaviour within a screenplay, as described by Fosse, occurs within the screenplay Flashdance.

The first instance of stage directions for dance action in Flashdance takes place at the beginning of the second scene. The location of this scene is Mowby’s Bar. The scene commences with the protagonist Alex performing a sexually charged go-go dance routine. Cultural studies theorist Angela McRobbie (1997, p. 217) in her writings about dance fictions describes this particular instance of dance action as ‘overtly sexual and therefore sleazy.’

It is therefore interesting to note that before Alex’s dance action occurs there is limited information for the audience to determine the nature of the location or atmosphere. However once Alex begins to dance it becomes apparent the location, Mowby’s Bar, is also a strip club aimed at a heterosexual male audience. As McRobbie observers (1997, p. 217) ‘Alex’s dancing in Mowby’s bar is choreographed to arouse sexually and this is accentuated in the film by the effect she has on the men sitting around watching her perform.’ This example therefore demonstrates a practical application of writing stage directions for dance action to set the location of a scene within a screenplay.

Application to Learning to Dance
Dance action will be applied extensively throughout Learning to Dance to achieve the purpose, as identified by Fosse, of creating the location or setting of a particular scene.

In act one the protagonist Giselle is shown moving into a high-rise government housing estate in Melbourne, Australia. There are several key scenes throughout the screenplay incorporating dance action that are located on the rooftop of the housing estate. This setting will allow for aerial views of Melbourne therefore providing a showcase for setting the location. An example from Learning to Dance is provided below.
47. INT NIGHT – INNER CITY PUBLIC HOUSING FLATS, ROOFTOP

In the moonlight, to the beat of the traffic below and with sweeping views of the Melbourne cityscape, GISELLE improvises a contemporary dance solo. GISELLE’S dance is fluid and graceful.

ALI appears, enthusiastically clapping.

And later in the same scene we can see the integration of dance action and location as Ali leads Giselle in a waltz.

GISELLE takes in the view.

GISELLE

You know this has to be the best view in Melbourne.

ALI, looking at GISELLE

ALI

Yes, it does.

Come here, I want to show you something.
ALI takes GISELLE’s hands, pulls her close and leads a waltz.

GISELLE

You can waltz, I’m impressed.

ALI

My first year in Australia at year 9 Learning to Dance class.

For a moment ALI and GISELLE dance together in silence, it is the first time they have been so close.

The two key supporting roles within Learning to Dance are Turkish immigrants who work in a Turkish restaurant. This restaurant will be used as a location for dance rehearsals as Giselle, and her dance partner, Yasmina practice for a dancing competition. As restaurant staff prepare for the next shift Giselle and Yasmina can be found rehearsing. Furthermore, Yasmina’s job at the restaurant is to perform belly dancing for the patrons during lunch and dinner. The restaurant is also owned and managed by Turkish immigrants and the locale will reflect some of the unique elements of the Turkish culture such as food, carpets and crockery. Setting dance action within the confines of the restaurant will provide the opportunity to show the audience visual aspects of the Turkish culture. Therefore dance action will again be applied to Learning to Dance to set the environment or atmosphere of a particular locale as suggested by Fosse.
An example of stage directions from Learning to Dance set in the Turkish restaurant is included below.

60. INT LATE AFTERNOON – INNER CITY, FARAH FARAH TURKISH RESTAURANT

GISELLE and YASMINA use the window of opportunity between the lunch and dinner shift for a dancing lesson. GISELLE is teaching YASMINA basic classical ballet steps.

And later in the same scene we can see the integration of dance action and location as Ali interrupts the dance action whilst working at the restaurant.

GISELLE is crouching and manipulating YASMINA’s feet and knees into position when ALI saunters by.

ALI

Ladies. Looking good. YASMINA, you’ll have to do a lot better than that if you want to keep up with GISELLE.

YASMINA

Don’t you have dishes to wash?


**Conclusion**

As discussed in the previous section Fosse’s criteria may be used as a guide for determining the purpose of incorporating stage directions for dance action into a screenplay. The above examples from *Learning to Dance* and *Flashdance* demonstrate how Fosse’s first criterion for writing stage directions for dance action – to set the environment, atmosphere or character location - may be practically applied. Furthermore this criterion is in accordance with the message of screenwriting theorists such as Field (1984), King (1988) and McKee (1997) who encourage screenwriters to visually demonstrate action and location.

2.9.4 **Further the Action**

Fosse’s second criterion ‘to further the action’ refers to moving the story of the screenplay forward. Therefore plot and dance action is integrated so that one may impact and influence the other. For example, for X dance action, such as two characters dancing together there is Y reaction, such as the two characters kissing for the first time, and thus the story moves forward.

Film theorist John C Kobal (1983, p. 281) in *Gotta Sing Gotta Dance* comments on Fosse’s work ‘Fosse’s dances arise out of the action, the action being an expression of the subconscious, and together they merge to create a unity in which song expresses mood and character, as naturally as turning a corner down a side street before rejoining the main road.’ For example, a song or dance performed by a character may demonstrate an aspect of a character that moves the story forward.

Likewise film theorist Jerome Delamater (1981) in his discussion about the integration of plot, character, song and dance into a meaningful whole in the film musical observes that Fosse has a conscious purpose behind his choreography. Delamater provides examples from one of Fosse’s film musicals, *Cabaret* and remarks that each of the dance numbers
within this musical has been purposefully selected to comment on the action in someway. Thus for dance action to move the story forward the dance action and plot must be integrated in someway. The examples provided in the case studies below provide practical examples of how this can be achieved.

**Application to case study – Strictly Ballroom**

In the screenplay *Strictly Ballroom* stage directions for dance action have been incorporated for the purpose of furthering the action as described by Fosse. An example of this occurs at the beginning of the first act of the screenplay. The protagonist Scott decides to perform dance steps at a competition that are forbidden by the Ballroom Dancing Federation judges. Scott and his partner Liz go on to lose the competition and Liz resigns their dance partnership. Therefore as a result of Scott’s dance action Liz resigns their dance partnership making way for his new partner and Scott’s love interest, Fran. Let’s take a look.

16. **INT TOWN HALL. FESTIVAL. NIGHT.**

Like a warrior into battle, Scott throws himself into a knee-slide between PAM’S legs. The crowd gasp. BARRY hisses in LES’S ear.

**BARRY**

What the bloody hell’s going on Kendall?

(Luhrmann & Pearce 1992, p. 8)

31 **INT. KENDALL’S STUDIO. KITCHEN. LATE AFTERNOON.**

SCOTT and LIZ are standing in the shabby Kendall’s studio kitchen.
SCOTT

I’m just asking you what you think of the steps.

LIZ

I don’t think. I don’t give a shit about them, we lost.

(Luhrmann & Pearce 1992, p. 14)

Here we can see as a consequence of Scott’s dance action – dancing his own steps – Liz’s negative reaction – thus moving the story forward.

Application to Learning to Dance

An example of dance action being incorporated into Learning to Dance to further the action occurs during scene 70. Throughout act two of the screenplay the key support role Yasmina has been growing increasingly jealous of the protagonist Giselle. In particular due to the attention and admiration Giselle has been receiving from the housing estate community because of her dance ability.

During scene 70 Yasmina and Giselle perform a routine for Yasmina’s belly dance students. At the conclusion of the routine the younger members of the class enthusiastically bestow hero like praise upon Giselle. Yasmina’s jealousy is heightened causing Yasmina, in a following scene to seek revenge by revealing Ali has a fiancé in Turkey. Let’s take a look.

70. INT LATE AFTERNOON – COMMUNITY CENTRE.

YASMINA’s belly-dance class are gathered together sitting on the floor at the front of the hall.
GISELLE

Five, six, seven, eight.

GISELLE and YASMINA begin dancing. Their hard work has paid off, the combination of belly dance, modern and ballet is unique and striking.

At the conclusion of the performance the class are on their feet clapping. Several of the younger star-struck class members enthusiastically approach GISELLE. YASMINA looks on – this was more than she bargained for.

72. INT MORNING – INNER city public housing flats, CHAN’S MILK BAR
GISELLE is working behind the counter when YASMINA arrives, determined.

YASMINA

Do you sell cards here?

GISELLE

I think we have some birthday cards out the back.

YASMINA
Good, I want to send a card to ALI’s fiancé.

GISSELLE

What? Ali has a fiancé?

YASMINA

Ah huh, in Turkey, didn’t he tell you?

GISSELLE

No...he didn’t mention it.

YASMINA

They have been engaged forever. She’s really, really nice.

Conclusion
As can be seen in the examples of dance action above, dance action has been applied and integrated into Learning to Dance and Strictly Ballroom to move the story forward as prescribed by Fosse. As per the overall framework, these examples also demonstrate a conscious purpose behind the stage directions – to further the action.
2.9.5 Express Emotion.

Fosse’s third criterion – to express emotion, suggests that stage directions for dance action may be applied within a screenplay to reveal and express the emotions of characters.

Linda Seger (1990, p. 34) in her text Creating Unforgettable Characters promotes the technique of showing and revealing character emotions in a screenplay as it provides an opportunity for screenwriters to create characters with depth ‘…understanding the emotions can produce a much richer character and a much deeper scene.’ This may be achieved by showing, through emotions such as sadness or happiness, how a situation or action has impacted and affected a character. Seger (1990) also suggests revealing character emotions may encourage the audience to feel empathy toward a particular character as the audience can see and understand how the character feels.

Likewise Dethridge (2003, p. 17) encourages her readers to tap into the emotional, ‘In Hollywood, executives refer to a good screenplay as one with heart. This is shorthand for an idea that resonates on a deep emotional level with a wide range of people. To achieve this there must be a strong emotion at the centre of your story…’

The examples provided below demonstrate how emotion may be communicated through stage directions for dance action.

Application to case study - Strictly Ballroom

Stage directions for dance action have been used in Strictly Ballroom to express character emotion. In a sample from scene 73 below we can see Scott and his future love interest Fran dancing together. Up to this point in the screenplay Scott has not regarded Fran as a love interest and Fran’s affections have been unrequited. However as Scott and Fran begin to dance, their mutually romantic feelings and emotions are revealed. Let’s take a look.
Slowly, he looks back at FRAN. Their eyes connect. There is music, and they are dancers. The distance between them disappears. They become one, dancing out the simple, profound, ancient beauty of the real Cuban rumba. Backstage, couples making their way to and from the dressing rooms stop to watch SCOTT and FRAN. They both now dance the dance of love with arresting sincerity...

(Luhrmann & Pearce 1992, p. 41)

**Application to Learning to Dance**

There are several scenes throughout *Learning to Dance* where dance action is used to reveal and show character emotion. An example of this occurs in act two in the scene immediately following Giselle’s first kiss with her love interest Ali. In this scene Giselle returns to her apartment and performs a lively neo classical solo on her own in the dark to express her joy and happiness. The scene will consist only of stage directions as follows.

**INT NIGHT – GISELLE’S APARTMENT**

GISELLE enters alone and rests the back of her head on the front door. A moment passes and GISELLE begins. Her contemporary style dance is fanciful and joyous and performed as if ALI is present and at times dancing with her.

**Conclusion**

The above examples from *Learning to Dance* and *Flashdance* demonstrate how Fosse’s criterion for writing stage directions for dance action – to express emotion - may be practically applied. Furthermore this criterion is in accordance with the message of screenwriting theorists such as Seger (1990) and Dethridge (2003) who encourage screenwriters to reveal character emotions.
2.9.6 Entertainment

Fosse’s fourth and final criterion that dance action may achieve in a screenplay is entertainment value. Fosse (Kobal 1983, p. 286) says ‘A lot of critics of musicals feel that these are the least desirable. However I enjoy them and have had some luck with them.’ A possible explanation for this critical reaction may be the assumption that dance action within a screenplay that exists for entertainment value is not necessarily integrated or related to the plot of the story. In other words, the function and purpose of the dance action does not achieve any of the criteria discussed in previous sections such as to further the action, express character emotion or set the location or atmosphere. Therefore dance action that occurs exclusively for entertainment purposes may be considered inferior by the critics Fosse refers to as it is of lesser value to the narrative.

It may also be difficult for the screenwriter to write dance action that is purely for entertainment value. This is because the source of the entertainment value may be derived by the integration of dance action with the plot. For example, McKee suggests entertainment value comes from the emotional reaction and pleasure the audience experience when watching a film (1997, p. 12) ‘To the film audience, entertainment is the ritual of sitting in the dark and concentrating on a screen in order to experience the story’s meaning and, with that insight, the arousal of strong, at times even painful emotions, and as the meaning deepens, to be carried to the ultimate satisfaction of these emotions.’ Thus the entertainment value of dance action may be acquired by a dance that expresses character emotion.

In the case studies reviewed there are very limited examples of dance action that fall exclusively into the category of pure entertainment value. One example is provided below from the screenplay Flashdance.

However as all dance action within Learning to Dance will be integrated with the plot in some way an example from Learning to Dance is not provided. That said, I am reminded
of Fosse’s earlier advice - that all dance action should be ‘accomplished with some beauty. They should be handsome to look at. And, somehow, emotionally affect the audience.’ (Kobal 1983, p. 286) I have been mindful of this recommendation throughout writing stage directions for dance action in Learning to Dance.

Application to case study - Flashdance
Scene 19 of Flashdance is set in a gymnasium. The sole focus of the dance action within this scene is on Alex and some of her minor female support roles using the gym equipment and working out wearing skimpy leotards. The main purpose of this scene appears to be entertainment value in particular as there is limited integration with the plot.

Conclusion
As demonstrated in the above example Fosse’s final criterion that dance action may achieve in a screenplay – entertainment value, can be applied to writing stage directions for dance action. However it is noted that this may be difficult to achieve in isolation from the narrative and is likely to also be attributed to other criteria such as to express emotion.

2.9.7 Application of Fosse’s Framework
Fosse’s framework does not require an extensive background in dance to be interpreted. This framework provides screenwriters with little or even no dance background with practical criteria to consider when writing stage directions for dance action. One advantage of Fosse’s framework over dance notation is its accessibility to screenwriters with or without a dance background.

The underlying questions Fosse’s framework asks screenwriters to consider when writing dance action are:

- What do I want to achieve?
- What is the conscious purpose of the dance action?
### Criteria (select one or more of the following.)

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Screenwriting theorists such as McKee, Dethridge, Davies and Seger suggest that stage directions should be succinct, brief and concise yet provide enough information to be clearly understood. Therefore the application of Fosse’s framework to writing stage directions for dance action should also be cognisant of these objectives and thus conform to the conventions of screenwriting.

### 2.10 Conclusion Dance Action

The objective of this research has been to investigate various methodologies for writing stage directions for dance action and exploring how such methodologies may be applied to my own screenplay *Learning to Dance*. It is also my intention to contribute to the screenwriting field by attempting to develop a structural and technical framework for providing choreographic direction appropriate to the conventions of screenwriting.

Three different techniques were explored Benesh Movement Notation, Labanotation and Bob Fosse’s framework for writing dance action.

Benesh Movement Notation and Labanotation are formally recognised systems of dance notation used around the world to record movement, in particular ballet. Both of these systems offer screenwriters the ability to precisely and accurately document stage directions for dance action.

Dance notation may appeal to screenwriters who have a background in dance and/or are experienced notators in a notation system such as Benesh Movement Notation or
Labanotation. However screenwriters without such a background are likely to struggle without third party assistance.

In addition to this the provision of a dance score within a film script may seriously infringe or eliminate the role of choreographer. From the outset my objective is to complement and inspire the role of choreographer by expressing dance action in a form that provides clear direction. Throughout my research, investigation and analysis of various techniques for writing stage directions for dance action I have been highly cognisant of this objective.

Bob Fosse’s framework is readily accessible to screenwriters, including those without a dance background and is relatively straightforward to use. This framework is also more appropriate to the conventions of writing stage directions within a screenplay, where brevity is of the essence. In light of this I have chosen to implement Fosse’s framework for the purpose of writing Learning to Dance.

I discovered Bob Fosse’s framework through my extensive review of literature. Based on this research and to my knowledge this framework has not been applied to the field of screenwriting. My contribution to this field therefore lies in my unique application of Fosse’s framework to writing stage directions for dance action.
3 Film Genres Containing Dance Action

3.1 Introduction
Film theorist Edward Buscombe (1995) in his essay The Idea of Genre, attributes Aristotle as the founder of genre. He does so by referring to Aristotle’s Poetics in which Aristotle identified a series of categories by which to classify poetry and literature, for example, tragedy and lyric. In his essay Buscombe (1995, pp. 12) considers a question debated by many genre critics - does usage of the rules and regulations that may govern a genre restrict the creativity and freedom of artists? ‘It need not necessarily be so,’ says Buscombe for ‘Aristole’s original intention was to be descriptive not prescriptive.’

In writing my screenplay I have adopted Buscombe’s approach to genre as it relates to the artist. My main aim is to investigate, appreciate and reflect upon and the creative works of screenwriters who have composed film scripts containing dance action.

As such it is my intention to write a screenplay that in part, borrows from the customs and codes of an established genre or subgenre. Dance action is an integral and defining element of Learning to Dance. Therefore my research has focussed specifically on film genres that contain dance action as a defining characteristic. Thus in this chapter I will investigate the observations made by film theorists about genres that contain dance action as a defining characteristic.

This investigation will commence by reviewing the history of dance action in early film making with a view to understanding how it is that dance action came to be included within screenplays.

3.2 Dance action in early filmmaking
Dance action has been integrated into film scripts since the inception of film in the late eighteen hundreds. Sherril Dodds (2001, p .4) in her book titled Dance on Screen recalls, ‘The first commercial screening in the United States on 23rd April 1896 included two
young women performing a parasol dance and the popular entertainer Annabelle the Dancer.

Annabelle the Dancer was Annabelle Moore a dancer of ‘considerable music hall fame.’ Annabelle is one of several dance hall performers who made the transition to film as filmmakers turned to music hall as a source of creative inspiration (Delamater 1981; Dodds 2001).

Delamater (1981, p. 11) in his text Dance in the Hollywood Musical explains why dance action was initially incorporated into films, ‘movement was, of course, the major interest in the early years of film making…’ It was the projection of moving pictures on to a screen, creating an illusion of movement that originally captured the interest of audiences who ‘sitting in the darkness…see their dreams appear before them.’ (Shiach 2003, p. 11) Therefore, dance, a specialised form of movement and a popular form of live entertainment was found to be particularly suited to film.

Wagenknecht (cited in Delamater 1981, p. 11) suggests the popularity of dance action in early filmmaking was also driven by the limitations of film technology. Early cinematography was restricted to the confines the bulky, stationary, immovable cameras of the day could capture. Dance action was found to be compatible with these cameras, as action subjects could be choreographed to perform within a fixed space.

Since the inception of dance action in early filmmaking dance has continued to feature prominently within narrative screenplays. In the next section we shall examine the two theoretically recognised film genres that contain dance action as a defining characteristic. Specifically, these are the musical genre and the dance movie genre. Whilst I shall demonstrate the distinction between the two is sometimes blurred both genres have been discussed at varying lengths by film theorists.
3.3 The Hollywood Musical

The first genre I will examine is the Hollywood musical. The film musical came to life shortly following the arrival of sound on film - the *talkie* - in 1927. Genre theorists commonly credit the Broadway musical play, with its roots in Vaudeville, music hall and theatre as the inspiration for the film musical. This is reflected in the Broadway orientation of early musical titles such as *Broadway Babies* and *Gold Diggers of Broadway*. (Altman 1999, p. 31)

The term musical, was not recognised as a ‘freestanding label designating a specific genre’ until 1930-1931 (Altman 1999, p. 32). According to Altman (1999) this label occurred in retrospect following the maturity and evolution of the genre. Altman uses examples from the film journal *Photoplay* to provide evidence of the original terms used to describe films that ‘are currently considered classics of the early musical.’ Some of these include epic, romantic musical comedy and 100% talking singing college picture.

In the opening paragraph of his book, *The Hollywood Musical* John Russell Taylor (1971, p. 10) answers his rhetorical question, ‘What is a musical? All talking, all singing, all dancing? Well, yes, preferably. But a lot more and sometimes a lot less. A film musical is, essentially, just that: a film which, in whole or in part, has its shape, its movement, its whole feeling dictated by music.’ Likewise, Neal (2000, p. 105) loosely defines musicals, ‘In varying measures and combinations, music, song and dance have been its only essential ingredients.’

Whilst the above definitions are simplistic, they reflect the main attributes of the musical - song, dance and music.

3.4 The Evolution of the Hollywood Musical

There exists considerable discourse and debate amongst theorists as to the history, evolution and definition of film genres and this is true of the musical.
Film theorist J.P Telotte, in his article *The New Hollywood Musical – From Saturday Night Fever to Footloose* discusses the evolution of the musical genre. Telotte (2002, p. 60) suggests the musical genre has evolved from the ‘the all talking, all singing, all dancing movie’ as these movies ‘ill fits the needs of the post-modern era.’ Telotte articulates two possible reasons for this.

Firstly, according to Telotte (2002), a contributing factor to the evolution of the musical occurred in the 1960’s when the US Government implemented policies mandating the break-up of the studio system. This impacted the resources available to create musicals as long established and successful production teams of choreographers, musicians and writers were dispersed amongst a new industry landscape of small independent studios. Therefore the individuals that worked together over a period of years to create signature narrative formulas for large studios such as MGM were working for smaller production houses. Thus, Tellote asserts the production of Hollywood musicals declined post 1950 due to the limited availability and mix of resources within the smaller studios to produce musicals.

Likewise, Delamater (1981) in a chapter of his book dedicated to the decline of the musical attests to the impact the demise of the studio system had on musicals. Delamater (1981, p. 169) also discusses the dependency on the major studios to provide teams of creative staff such as dancers, singers, costumers to create musicals. ‘The available resources on every level made the necessary additional expenses of the musical possible.’

Secondly, Telotte (2002) suggests the evolution of the musical genre was influenced by the demand for realism from the movie going audience. Telotte (2002, p. 48) contends, due to cultural changes, audiences had become less inclined to accept ‘characters suddenly bursting into song or dance.’ Therefore, since the late seventies there has been a trend in musicals toward the realistic, such as placing song and dance in the settings they would appear in real life, for example on the stage, at a disco or in a dance studio. Telotte (2002, p. 50) refers to the films that ‘form a realistic frame around those expressive elements’ as the new musical or musically oriented films.
Telotte (2002) actively includes films that do not contain song as examples of new musicals or musically oriented films. For example, some of the films Telotte categorizes as musicals that do not contain song include *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, *Dirty Dancing* and *Saturday Night Fever*. This is particularly interesting as the earlier definitions provided in this chapter prescribe song as an essential characteristic of the musical. For example, we are reminded of Neal (2000, p.105) who suggests, ‘the musical is a mongrel genre…music, song and dance are its only essential ingredients.’ However Neal then goes on to contradict this statement by classifying *Saturday Night Fever* as a musical.

There appears to be a lack of consistency regarding the definition of the film musical. Debate and differences of opinion about the musical genre are not uncommon. Neal (2000, p. 105) makes reference to this in his writing about the musical and its sub genres ‘As we shall see, historian, critics and theorists of the musical sometimes disagree about the meaning of some of these terms.’ As Telotte proposes, a potential reason for this may be that the musical genre is evolving and changing as it responds to various factors such as audience demand.

### 3.5 The Dance Film Genre

The second genre to be discussed is the dance movie. In his feature article, *Dancing in the Dark*, journalist and scholar Adrian Martin critiques a film genre he calls, the dance movie. Martin examines the common elements that form the dance film genre and illustrates these with examples from various films such as *Bootmen*, *Kick*, *Billy Elliot*, *Centre Stage*, *Strictly Ballroom* and *Dirty Dancing*.

### 3.6 Common Themes of Martin’s Dance Film Genre

Martin says, ‘the dance movie is a close cousin to the sports movie…’ (2000, p. 11) He explains this is because these genres contend with a similar set of themes that drive the narrative of the screenplay.
Let’s briefly explore these below.

1.) **The generational clash of the young talent and old coach.** Here Martin has identified a common source of conflict between the protagonist and another supporting character within dance and sports films.

2.) **The testing of the human body as an instrument and the ever present threat of physical injury.** Martin’s second observation regards the protagonist in dance films and the barriers or obstacles that may prevent the protagonist from achieving his or her goals. For example, the protagonist sustaining a physical injury that prevents him or her from taking part in a dance competition or sporting event.

3.) **The limited performance life of the dancer or athlete.** This theme explores the notion that dancers and athletes have a limited age gap in which to achieve in their chosen field. This is primarily because dance and sport is typically physically demanding and the physical condition of the body generally lessens with age.

4.) **The challenge of the protagonist to find a workable relationship between those moments of fantastic intensity in the spotlight and the entire remainder of one’s lifetime.** This theme focuses on a central problem the protagonist in a screenplay may strive to overcome. This problem may be used to drive the narrative of the screenplay.

The definition of the musical provided by theorists in previous sections tends to fairly loose. For example we are reminded of Neal (2000, p. 105) ‘In varying measures and combinations, music, song and dance have been its only essential ingredients.’ In comparison Martin’s definition of the dance movie genre, as seen above is more prescriptive and tends to specifically focus on the elements that drive the narrative.
It is also interesting to note that the examples of dance movies provided by Martin in his article do not contain song and Martin does not refer to song as a requisite or element of the dance movie. Thus the exclusion of song further narrows the definition of the dance movie.

I have therefore selected Martin’s dance movie genre as the best fit for Learning to Dance. The definition Martin provides of the dance movie and the examples he uses to illustrate the definition (such as Kick, Billy Elliot, Centre Stage, Strictly Ballroom and Dirty Dancing) best fit my conception of Learning to Dance.

3.7 Conclusion - The Evolution of the Hollywood Musical and the Dance Movie Genre

Dance action has been integrated into film scripts since the inception of film in the late eighteen hundreds. The two genres that contain dance action as a defining characteristic are the Musical and the Adrian Martin’s Dance Movie.

Initially I rejected classifying Learning to Dance as a musical primarily because I am not intending to write a narrative told through song – an element I initially considered a requisite of the musical genre. Whilst dance accompanied by music will be included in Learning to Dance, song will not. All dialogue will be spoken, not sung. I therefore selected Adrian Martin’s dance movie genre as most appropriate for writing my screenplay as the criteria of this genre best fits my vision of Learning to Dance.

Yet my research into the musical genre has raised further research questions. Is the dance movie genre a sub genre of the musical or a genre of its own right? Or is the dance movie genre not a genre or sub genre at all but a new musical or musically oriented film as defined by Telotte? Perhaps there is not a definitive answer to these questions, but simply recognition that the study of genre is not fixed, it is living and ever changing as new patterns and trends are devised and repeated.
Altman likens the evolution and redefinition of genres to the study of cartography ‘The map can never be completed, because it is a record not of the past, but a living geography, an ongoing process’ (Altman 1999, p. 70). Based on my research, I tend to agree. Therefore whilst I have focussed on Martin’s dance movie genre and actively refer to Learning to Dance as a dance movie I accept that there may be other permutations of genres that may also be suitable.
4 References


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